

Introduction

Over the years, scores of authors have written about the 1898 Wilmington Race Riot. Yet, the State of North Carolina has never formally investigated the insurrection. On the heels of Florida's investigation into the 1923 Rosewood Massacre, Oklahoma's inquiry into the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot, and the centennial of the Port City's tragic event in 1898, the General Assembly in 2000 enacted legislation calling for the creation of a commission to examine the riot and to develop a historical record. The law also called on the commission to delve into the "economic impact of the riot on African-Americans in this State."

The 1898 Wilmington Race Riot Commission bill was sponsored by two Wilmington legislators, Senator Luther H. Jordan, who died in April 2002, and Representative Thomas E. Wright. The men developed the Commission to build upon earlier work done to commemorate the centennial anniversary in 1998, when local residents of both races participated in a variety of programs that brought renewed interest to the subject. The Commission is composed of thirteen members, appointed by the legislature, the governor, mayor and city council of Wilmington, and New Hanover County Board of Commissioners. Assisting the Commission with its work have been staff members of the Department of Cultural Resources, who have provided research and administrative assistance. This report is the culmination of three years of work by Commission members and staff of the Department of Cultural Resources.

The work done in Florida and Oklahoma to study similar localized rioting based on racial divisions became a model for the Commission report. Those states developed legislation to support investigations into their riots. Their findings, a combination of scholarly research and analysis, were seen as an ideal model for North Carolina. The Rosewood Report, completed in 1993, and the Tulsa Report, completed in 2001, provided detailed explanations for the causes and effects of the riots and led to a series of recommendations for the states to address the wrongs perpetrated generations earlier.

In recent decades, authors of books, articles, theses, and dissertations have studied causes of the Wilmington riot and the subsequent event itself but few have searched to find answers to what the riot did to the city of Wilmington. This report seeks to explain the development of the African American community in Wilmington in the framework of an overall story of the city's growth from the 1860's through to the first decades of the twentieth century. To understand the context of what happened in 1898, consideration of every aspect of life in the city must be included in a study. The report follows a chronological format, beginning with the Civil War and Reconstruction and ends with analysis of the impact of the riot and the Democratic Party's campaign of 1898 on African Americans in New Hanover County. Analysis and discussion of African American life in twentieth century Wilmington ends just before the advent of World War I. Simply put, beginning with World War I, the city began to undergo a series of economic changes similar to those of the rest of state and nation that affected all citizens, regardless of race. Wartime building booms interspersed with depression and economic lulls combined with the advent of the modern civil rights movement to create new dynamics in race relations. A singular event, still remembered by many residents, was the Wilmington 10 incident in February, 1971. Mindful of their past, witnesses and participants in that episode drew connections to the 1898 riot and saw that the violence of 1971 was distinctly related to unresolved conflicts of 1898.